

## **The phenomenon of trend in project-making: Contemporary perspectives**

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### **Introduction**

The phenomenon of projectification pervades the life of contemporary man (Lundin et al. 2015). As pointed out by Jensen, Thuesen and Geraldi (2016), projects “*permeate what we do, how we speak, how we think of our daily activities, how we construct our identities, and ultimately, who we are*”. Projects change the face and shape of the surrounding space and impact the development of different social groups. Due to the global reach of the process and the ever-increasing number of projects, it is necessary to indicate the reasons for this popularity and the diversity of projects, but also to delineate the direction in which projectification is going, bearing in mind the potential risks related to the changes taking place. This is especially true for Europe, where “*the new form of redistributing money and power within the European realm is arguably more readily perceivable in rural areas. However urban development has also been reshaped in the wake of ‘projectification’*” (Füzér 2013: 28).

More and more dimensions of our lives are shaped directly or indirectly by projects. At the level of the country, individual regions, cities, towns, villages, housing communities, streets and individuals, various types of projects are implemented. The spatial scope of projects covering all countries and their wide thematic spectrum – from mega-projects changing the centres of the largest cities, to mini projects operating on a micro scale – implies the need to explore and question the phenomenon of trend in contemporary project-making. The indication of leading trends will help systematise knowledge and identify the most important areas of activity in contemporary societies. Thus, it will provide insight into the future and enable further reflection upon our chosen course, and how we might tackle problems in different areas most efficiently.

### **Theoretical background**

Following the dominant project activities carried out in various parts of the world, one can make a simplified division into three main thematic categories of projects, namely projects (1) carried out by companies/business projects, (2) carried out in a specific space and strongly related to the same, and (3) strictly social. Business projects (1) are those related to the implementation of all types of ventures by companies. Space-related projects (2) are undertakings where the focus is on modification of physical space. Finally, strictly social activities (3) focus on people, their knowledge, qualifications and competences. At the same time, even a superficial analysis of projects with a specific spatial and social dimension encounters a problem, because the elements allowing for their identification do not exist disjointly but are intertwined (in many cases they are supposed to be complementary). This, of course, does not contradict the legitimacy of the simplified branding of projects as social or spatial, provided that we are fully aware of their complexity.

Starting from the assumed division, if we look at various spatial projects (understood as a combination of spatial and social aspects), we are more likely to come across projects related to urban space – ‘urban projects’. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, cities, especially large ones, have many problems requiring continuous intervention because of their development dynamics (rapid changes generate the need for continuous problem solving). Secondly, cities are areas where a large proportion of the space is shared, and this creates the need to participate in its use. This is particularly evident in countries with civil society. Thirdly, global competition between cities has contributed to the spread of the project management model around the world. Along with the evolution of the ideas of neoliberal economy, the role of cities has changed. Modern cities are not top-down administrative units. Cities forced to compete for limited goods resemble companies. There has been a transformation from the administrative and distributive model of the welfare state to the model of urban entrepreneurship policy (Jamka 2011). Forced rivalry contributed to many actions unplanned by the local government. They were dictated not only by the need to renovate cities after the crisis of the 1970s and 1980s (Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez 2002), but at the same time they were supposed to attract investors. Therefore, the basic catalyst for the expansion of project-based urban management was the crisis of the post-industrial city.

The factor determining the popularity of projects is, first of all, the imposed manner of investment financing. International organisations, e.g. the European Union (EU), rely on projects to a large extent when conducting their policy for regional or local development. Similarly, other public, private and non-governmental organisations, provide opportunities to apply for financing by offering support in the form of projects. Moreover, the specific fashion for projects is the result of this method of implementing tasks. The features of projects, including their uniqueness, complexity, wide range of impact, focus on a specific objective, ideally correspond to the needs of modern society. Due to the above factors, the most popular model for management of contemporary space is that of projects based on experiences from the business world.

## Dominant trends

The common denominator of urban projects is the willingness to adapt the space to the needs of the citizens, which can be achieved through various paths: from physical changes in the urban tissue, often accompanied by an attempt to solve social problems (revitalisation projects), through the introduction of functions stimulating development, activating or integrating the local community, to projects aimed at implementing comprehensive functional solutions. The diversity of the implemented projects is so vast that the above-mentioned directions need to be described in more detail to demonstrate, through selected examples, the wide array of problems to be solved.

*First of all, as mentioned above, there are projects focused on ‘revitalisation’ in the broad sense of the term.* The crisis of down-town districts strongly affected by rising unemployment, the effects of international migration, destruction of infrastructure and depopulation have had an impact on the continuous implementation of projects aimed at a comprehensive or partial renovation of the city centre. A large group of projects consists of activities focused on investments in urban areas degraded after the closure of industrial facilities. In the literature, such investments are called brownfield investments. They consist in the re-use of disused land which had lost its previous function. It is indicated that in contrast to greenfield investments, brownfield investments recycle space, which allows for the management of cities according to the idea of the compact city (Środa-Murawska et al. 2017).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has also been the century of ‘railway’ projects (cf. Halsall 2001; Erkan 2012; Krzysztofik, Dragan and Gierczak 2014; Alexander and Hamilton 2015; Dragan, Dymitrow and Krzysztofik 2019). Classic examples include the ‘urban mega-project’: Stockholm Central Station, Amsterdam Central Station, Stuttgart 21, which aimed, among other things, at “*the expansion and upgrading of rail infrastructure, the reduced demand for industrial space in central urban locations, the privatization of railways, efforts to increase the attractiveness of cities*” (Bertolini, Curtis and Renne 2012: 31).

*The next set consists of projects aimed at revitalising space by implementing new activities or strengthening existing ones.* The introduced changes may concern both exogenous and endogenous functions. Their scale may be local or cover the whole space, contributing, e.g., to the change in social composition or direction of development.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has also been characterised by the dominance of projects focusing on the idea of cities attracting the creative class, initiated by Florida (2002). The concept of creative cities is the reality of the largest cities, and thus the largest projects were implemented precisely there. The search for unique and original events with the potential to contribute to the city’s growth in stature is reflected in the organisation of a number of festivals. Some of the cultural events have gained a worldwide reputation as a brand in their own right. The popularity of festivalisation means note must be taken of this phenomenon, as it is characteristic of the development of modern cities (Cudny 2016; Richards 2017).

This group also comprises a trend consisting in the implementation of the European Capital of Culture (ECC) programme. The idea of the ECC is a standard example of the promotion and inclusion of the cultural sector in urban development strategies. From the outset, the main cultural capitals of Europe, i.e. Athens (1985), Florence (1986), etc. promoted culture and heritage at cultural festivals. The idea changed dramatically when Glasgow was awarded the ECC title, which resulted in the economic and physical revitalisation of the city through culture. The planned and implemented objectives related to cultural events contributed to the overwhelming success of the city. ECC projects are part of a broader trend towards culture-led regeneration, i.e. projects dedicated to the renewal of degraded areas using culture (Evans and Shaw 2004; Środa-Murawska 2019).

It is worth noting here the projects dedicated to sports-led development, first of all carried out in Olympic cities. The degree of interest and the many active and passive participants in major sporting events are responsible for urban redevelopment or expansion projects (Gratton and Henry 2002).

As a rule, a different scale accompanies an interesting activity based on projectification – urban farming. It is a response to the dwindling resources of biologically active land in cities in developed countries, increasing air pollution and omnipresent noise. However, the environmental effect itself is not predominant. Urban farming also brings social benefits and can be a source of food for local communities in developing countries (Egziabher 1994; Foeken and Mboganie-Mwangi 2000; Haysom et al. 2019). Though there are many positive aspects in the activity of urban farmers, it may also be negative in nature through inadequate urban policy, contributing, e.g., to chaotic urban planning, traffic problems and environmental degradation (Moshia 1991). It is worth mentioning the phenomenon of guerrilla gardening, because in this case gardening activity takes place informally, without the consent of the landowner. Such grassroots initiatives are often a manifestation of the need to care about the aesthetics of the surroundings combined with the need to be in touch with nature.

*The third path revolves around searching for comprehensive solutions.* A large group of projects includes activities in the field of sustainable development and environmental protection. This

is the result of a growing awareness of the ecological state of our planet and the environmental threats from human activity. Sustainable urban development projects provide integrated, comprehensive measures to attenuate the impact of industry, transport, etc. on the environment. One example of a mega-project on an international scale was the Kyoto Protocol, which included actions taken by states to combat global climate change (Trexler and Kosloff 1998; Moomaw et al. 1999).

Sustainable development projects have proven a springboard for various trends in the design of cities which have become more or less environmentally friendly. These trends include one of the most popular urban concepts, namely *smart city*, where one of the main assumptions is a *smart environment* based on renewable energy sources (Kylili and Fokaides 2015; Calvillo, Sánchez-Miralles, and Villar 2016).

A similar trend, but with the main emphasis on the coexistence of the city with the natural environment, is the *eco-city* or *green city*. The projects implemented within this strand are based on many activities focused on, among others, prioritizing green areas, reducing the share of individual transport in favour of cycling and walking, supporting local agriculture and social gardens, protecting biodiversity or cooperating with enterprises in the implementation of ecological activities (Roseland 1997; Hulicka 2015). The increasing fashion for being *eco* and *green* has also created new risks. One of them is *greenwashing* which involves companies misleading consumers about their purportedly good eco-practices and corporate environmental responsibility (Furlow 2010). It is indicated that greenwashing firms apply two measures at the same time: they take little care of the environment and create a positive message about their pro-environmental activities. There are two levels of manipulation: when a company is touted as eco-friendly (firm-level greenwashing) and when a product or service supposedly reaps environmental benefits (product-level greenwashing) (Delmas and Burbano 2011).

Concepts bordering on sustainable development such as *resilient city* and *compact city* are also part of these trends. The former is based on building resilience and cities adapting to natural hazards (Klein, Nicholls and Thomalla 2003; Jabareen 2013). The latter is based on the highest possible building intensity and the lowest possible use of space.

However, regardless of the dominant trend, some common features are present in the projectification of space, namely:

- urban projects are most often state-led and often state-financed,
- “*planning through urban projects has indeed emerged as the main strategy to stimulate economic growth and to ‘organize innovation’, both organizationally and economically,*
- *the emergence of a more fragmented and pluralistic mode of urban governance has also contributed to the redefinition of roles played by local authorities*” (Swyngedouw, Moulaert and Rodriguez 2002: 566–567).

Separating a group of social projects is, as mentioned earlier, a matter of discussion. However, it seems reasonable to point to a certain group of projects which are commonly referred to as social projects/soft projects. Their expansion is related to the need to reconcile growing social needs with financial constraints. Project activities undertaken in order to satisfy current needs and conducive to social development are implemented due to unfavourable demographic changes, growing social problems caused by an unstable financial and economic situation and increasing social needs. In order to meet these challenges, changes in the implementation of social policy in European countries mainly focus on solutions based on social investment.

## Problems

The described dominant trends in project activities may prove ineffective if mistakes are made. It is extremely important that local decision-makers start the process of preparing projects that are not based on the incoming competitions but are in line with the needs of the city. The authors' experience of the implementation of various types of urban projects in former socialist countries shows that in many cases the disorderly planning of projects is terrifying. The particular interests of individual stakeholder groups distort the very idea of many urban projects. This is partly due to the lack of local spatial development plans. In many towns and cities, we are dealing with a conglomeration of development conditions and indications for land development implemented by individual investors which are often mutually exclusive. This is connected with the patchwork nature of projects and activities and the chaotic spatial development with individual elements poorly 'glued' into one whole. This process in relation to the capital of Poland is analysed by Anioł (2016), who points out, e.g., the problems associated with the unplanned project of the so-called 'Mordor', i.e. an office district to which about 100,000 people commute every day, and which was not and still has not been adapted to its character.

Another problem is citizens' lack of interest in social participation. Even the youngest generation are still not being taught to actively participate in society (cf. Środa-Murawska, Dąbrowski and Smoliński 2018). As a result, when the residents are invited to speak out during the planning phase, the participants are always the same – 'community activists' and/or people directly interested in a given problem. In extreme cases, these are someone's cliques who can support/protest an idea. Most often, however, the supposedly most interested party, e.g. the residents of a given street/district, are not present. It is also a feature widely discussed in the public debate – the lack of an educated, active civil society in post-socialist countries.

Another threat to the effectiveness of project activities may be the phenomenon of *social washing*, which is defined as companies' use of marketing information which creates the false impression that the company's policy is based on the creation of social values, while in truth it is not. Companies are increasingly moving away from green activities towards sustainable activities that cover a wider spectrum of factors, i.e.: environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors. Currently, teams of individuals are taking on companies' role in society, because it influences the interest of stakeholders, potential investors and employees (Akinyemi et al. 2013). Copying projects that have been successfully completed in a given place but that are not necessarily a good fit in other conditions may also be problematic (Dymitrow 2014). This shortcut appears easy and tempting, but it may be a blind alley. Using best practices is not wrong, but it must be connected with an analysis of the project's adjustment to given circumstances, taking into account local conditions (also secondary ones). Unique projects, built from scratch, are more likely to effectively solve problems.

## Looking ahead

Speaking about the future, it is worth asking the question: What is the reason for the astounding success of projectification today and, at the same time, can these factors remain valid in the future? Above all, it seems that the answer to this question lies in the universality of the approach that fits different concepts (from large to small, from short- to long-term, from top-down to bottom-up, from action in the urban fabric to action in the social fabric or modification of functions). In the planning and implementation phases, the project process concretises and organises the activities. The focus on achieving the desired outcome has a mobilising effect, at

the same time facilitating the involvement of various actors. Finally, it is worth noting that such a form makes it easier to share experiences – building a set of good practices means building a set of successful projects.

Although one has to be very careful when trying to infer future trends, it seems that the future of the project approach is not threatened. The factors guaranteeing its current success should continue to work in the future, although some changes can certainly be expected. These can be brought about by technological progress related to access to information, making it ever easier to use. The expected effect may be a quicker reaction to existing problems and inclusion of a larger part of the society in decision-making processes – resulting in the beneficial phenomenon of co-responsibility.

However, the effectiveness of the project approach may depend on the decisions of local authorities responsible for disbursing funds and on how active the local community is. The clash between grassroots initiatives (focused on solving specific problems) and top-down activities (assumably far-reaching, in line with general planning assumptions, although in some cases not free from decisions dictated by political pragmatism) may have different effects. The growing importance of grassroots initiatives is a response to the problems resulting from neoliberal urban management, so it is beneficial to plan activities with the inhabitants. Bottom-up activities should be supported and coordinated with local authorities' policy plans. When combined, they may create interesting and valuable initiatives that build social bonds, such as urban gardening; however, without support these initiatives may become chaotic or turn into a form of disapproval manifested by the residents (guerrilla gardening). Being sensitive to the needs of both parties and searching for compromise solutions through joint projects will undoubtedly remain the most effective form of action.

Future prevalent thematic trends of projectification will be determined by the most important problem areas of individual regions. There is a clear trend related to the implementation of transport investment. Apart from the huge motorway projects, the predominant type is the reconstruction or rebuilding of all kinds of transport solutions which must be environmentally friendly and relieve the current transport system. For example, the public bicycle is one of the new and innovative urban transport services (Zhang, Xu and Yang 2015; Belanche, Casaló and Orús 2016; Kwiatkowski 2018). A good example is the process of evolution of subsequent generations of bike-sharing projects in Poland, described by Kwiatkowski (2018), which changed along with the development of modern technologies and the evolving needs of their users (DeMaio 2009; Shaheen, Guzman and Zhang 2010).

A future trend is reflected in the growing share of 'senior' projects aimed at adapting spaces to the growing elderly population. They focus on fulfilling the principles indicated by Burton and Mitchell (2006), i.e. familiarity, distinctiveness, safety, comfort, accessibility, legibility. Projects described by Yung, Conejos and Chan (2016) also emphasise the active role of seniors in planning, which increases their social inclusion in city life.

As noted, the direction of action is dictated by climate change. Projects related to the creation of resilient cities – cities resistant to adverse weather conditions, as well as projects aimed at reducing the detrimental impact of man on the natural environment – will gain in importance. It is also worth mentioning that in the future solving global problems should aim at coordinated actions based on cooperation between cities of similar size (as they are facing similar problems) in a supra-regional and international system.

To sum up, when thinking about the phenomenon of trend in project-making, it might be worthwhile to reflect briefly on this phenomenon. In the conditions of globalisation, we are increasingly facing similar problems, although they arise in areas with different cultural,

economic or political characteristics. Projects are supposed to bring solutions and respond to emerging needs. If the two are convergent, then when creating a project, we are in line with the existing trend. This seems natural and does not raise any objections. Going one step further, it also seems fully justified to use other people's solutions. Taking note of other experiences, observing projects can bring benefits. This is often an opportunity to notice problems at a stage when less money is needed to solve them. Should we therefore be enthusiastic about projects? The answer seems quite obvious if we bear in mind the problems identified earlier. It should be remembered that despite the similarities between the issues, their solutions may not always be the same. The transfer of ready-made solutions need not be a threat if we take into account the individual context, retain critical thinking and common sense, and are not driven by particular interests or aim at short-sighted goals.

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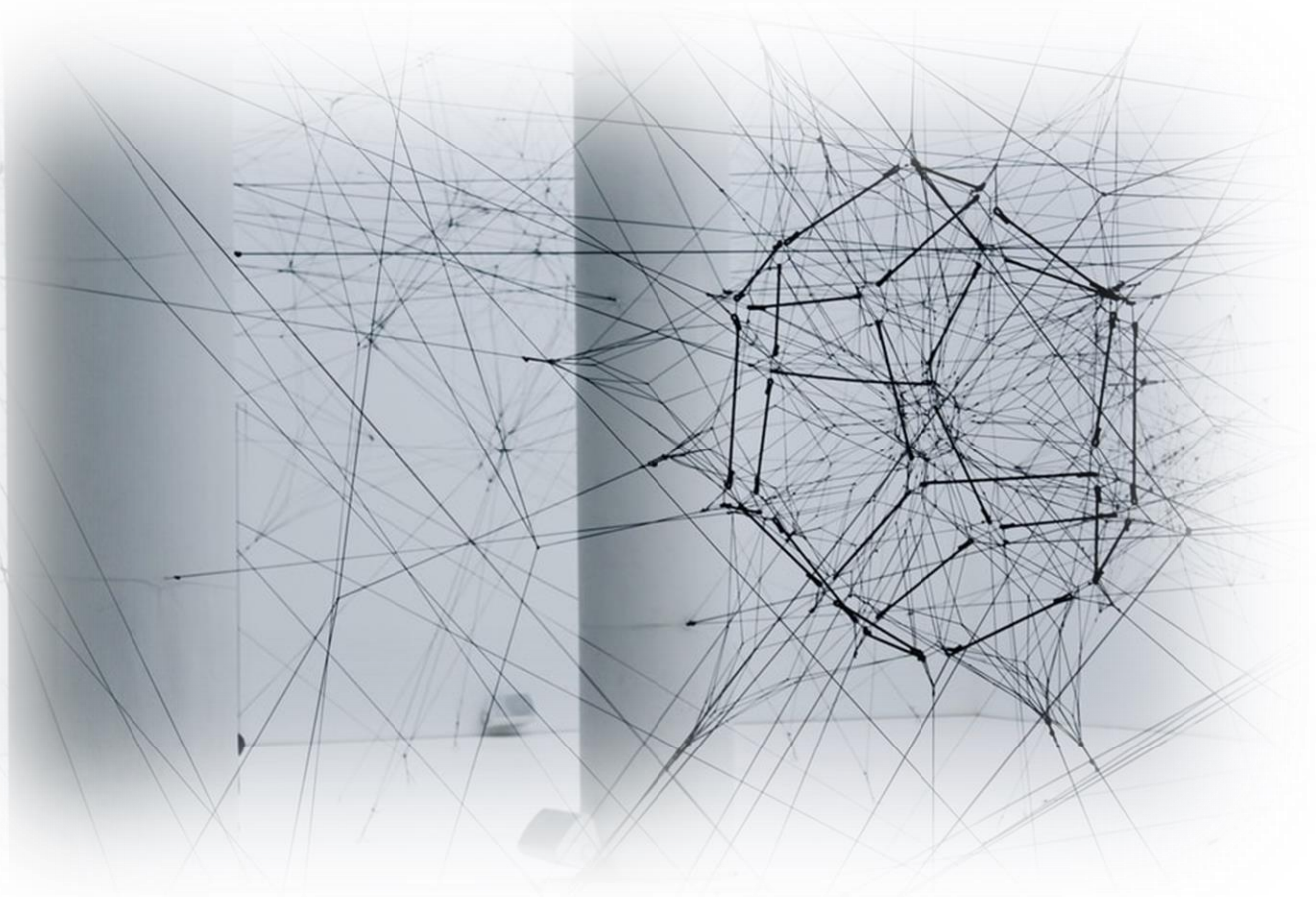
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# Anatomy of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century **sustainability** project

The untold stories



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